

Babies' Bodies and Brains: Multi-System Assessment and Treatment of the Premature/Medically Complex Infant for the Rehabilitation Professional

Holly Schifsky, OTR/L, CNT, NTMTC, CBIS

Faculty

Holly Schifsky has worked in pediatrics for the past 28 years with the past 17 years in a level IV NICU. She is a Certified Neonatal Therapist, Certified Neonatal Touch and Massage Therapist, Certified Brain Injury therapist, a member of National Association of Neonatal Therapists, and has completed 6-month mentorship in infant/child NDT. She has worked within the NICU and NICU follow-up clinic to maximize patient and family outcomes for the most complex premature and medically-fragile term infants. Holly received her BS in OT from the University of North Dakota. She is a faculty member for the Neonatal Touch and Massage certification; and Manuel Edema Mobilization training. She is the recipient of the National Association of Neonatal Therapists Clinical Excellence award in 2018, due to her clinical expertise and dedication to advancing the therapeutic interventions for NICU infants with cardiopulmonary conditions.

Disclosure - Financial: Holly Schifsky receives an honorarium from ERI.

Non-Financial: She has no non-financial relationships to disclose.

Course Requirements

In order to maximize the learning experience during lab time, each participant needs to bring a soft body doll. The ideal size would be 10-15", but any soft body doll will work.

About this Course:

This intermediate-advanced course will provide a systems-based approach to assess the premature/medically complex infant in the NICU/PICU setting. This course will focus on understanding the co-morbidities associated with prematurity and medically complex infants and increase critical reasoning skills for the clinician to create treatment plans to advance motor and feeding skills for the infant. It will build on information provided during the "Baby Beats and Breaths" course but can be a stand-alone course for advanced clinicians working with medically complex infants. This course will provide the clinician with hands-on treatment techniques for positioning/handling infants in the Small Baby unit (infants under 32 weeks gestation), oral motor interventions to support pre-feeding/feeding development, edema management including lymphatic facilitation, post-surgical considerations for infants, trunk facilitation to support cough development, extremity facilitation to support ribcage development, pelvic floor activation for stooling, abdominal facilitation for infants with GI complications, scar assessment/treatment, and feeding techniques for infants with multi-system co-morbidities.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify three anatomical and kinesiological developmental changes for the premature and newborn thoracic and abdominal cavity as related to motor development for oral feeding and postural control
- Apply at least two positioning/handling interventions for small babies, with focus on interventions for infants 28 weeks and younger
- Identify three neurological and gastrointestinal co-morbidities of prematurity (including anatomical changes post-surgical interventions for necrotizing enterocolitis) and the effects those co-morbidities have on feeding/motor development for the infant
- Differentiate the lymphatic system of the premature infant from that of the full-term infant and how those differences affect feeding skills
- Assess infant edema within face, extremities, and trunk using objective measurements
- Apply two treatment strategies with positioning, handling and edema management using the provided case study
- Integrate a systems approach to a current individualized care plan for a premature and/or medically complex infant

Audience:

This course is recommended for intermediate to advanced neonatal therapists, PTs, PTAs, OTs, OTAs, and SLPs, working with infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Schedule – Day 1 8:40 am to 5:30 pm EST (US)

- 8:40-9:00** Webinar Registration/Zoom Course Opens
- 9:00-10:00** Updates in Literature: Includes resources and references for individualized learning
- 10:00-11:00** Typical Development of the Premature Infant
- Anatomy and kinesiology of the trunk, extremities, oral cavity
- 11:00-11:15** Break
- 11:15-12:00** Co-morbidities of Prematurity
- Development of organ systems and effects of co-morbidities; including necrotizing enterocolitis, intraventricular hemorrhage, periventricular leukomalacia, renal anomalies, bronchopulmonary dysplasia, congenital heart defects, airway anomalies/injuries
- 12:00-1:00** Small Baby Unit: Neonatal Therapy Interventions
- Identifying risk groups: infants 22-25 weeks; 26-29 weeks; and 30-32 weeks
 - Education on development of skin, clinical practices to protect skin, positioning/handling to protect skin, humidification.
 - Protecting sleep, neurodevelopmental protection in the NICU, environmental modifications
 - Pulmonary interventions to reduce lung injury in fragile infants
- 1:00-1:30** LUNCH
- 1:30-3:30** LAB: Small Baby Unit (DEMO and VIDEO)
- Two-person cares
 - Diapering small infants
 - Positioning/handling with standard cares
 - Positioning/handling for atelectasis, micro-turns verse full movement
 - Stand pivot transfer for Kangaroo care
 - Critical Lab values
 - Oral Cares
 - Oral motor interventions
 - Facial assessment with pulmonary equipment
- 3:30-3:45** Break
- 3:45-4:15** Oral Feeding for Premature infants
- Oral feeding assessment
 - Bottle/nipple selection
 - Monitor infant cues, positioning infant during oral feeding, progressing infant feeding plan
 - Atypical feeding behaviors and risk factors
- 4:15-4:45** Necrotizing Enterocolitis (NEC): multi-system effects of NEC, progression of enteral feeding, surgical interventions, risk for Short-Gut syndrome, oral feeding and motor considerations
- Classifications of NEC, medical interventions, antibiotics use, use of perfusion monitoring (NIRS), and implications on development (oral feeding, GI motility and abdominal activation).
 - Neonatal therapist clinical algorithm to advance cares
 - Neurodevelopmental outcomes
- 4:45-5:30** LAB + Lecture: GI Considerations
- Scar assessment and treatment
 - Abdominal sensory and motor assessment/treatment
 - GI facilitation techniques
 - Pelvic floor activation for stooling
 - Oral motor facilitation for endurance
 - Oral feeding progression and strategies
 - Nutritional considerations

Schedule – Day 2 8:40 am to 5:30 pm EST (US)

- 8:40-9:00** Webinar Registration/Zoom Course Opens
- 9:00-9:45** Updates in Literature: includes resources and references for individualized learning
- 9:45-10:30** Abdominal Wall Defects: lecture on gastroschisis, omphalo-cele, postural control and oral feeding interventions for this diagnostic group
- 10:30-11:30** Neurological system: Lecture on neurological development of the premature infant, effects of intraventricular hemorrhage, periventricular leukomalacia, surgical intervention with shunts, hydrocephalus
- Use of NIRS perfusion monitoring for neuroprotection
 - Risk of seizures
 - Neurodevelopmental outcomes
- 11:30-11:45** Break
- 11:45-1:00** LAB Neuro-interventions
- Symmetrical and asymmetrical movement
 - Closed chain input for motor learning with infants
 - Oral motor interventions:
 - Techniques to reduce gagging/retching
 - Lingual elevation
 - Lip seal
 - Pharyngeal lift
- 1:00-1:30** LUNCH
- 1:30-3:30** Cardiopulmonary System of the Premature or Critically Ill Term Infant: anatomical differences, congenital heart defects, and vascularization. A therapist's guide for critical reasoning
- Cardiopulmonary system and the unique changes required for the infant to have a successful in-utero to extra-utero transition
 - Common congenital heart defects and effects on infant development
 - Perfusion considerations related to risk of NEC, IVH, and ventilation-perfusion ratio
- 3:30-3:45** Break
- 3:45-4:15** Lymphatic System: Lymphatic system development, assessment and interventions
- Maturation of system per gestational age, and genetic conditions related to lymphedema
 - Chylothorax and implications on feeding/development
 - Assessing edema as acute or chronic, identifying when to intervene with edema management, and understanding pharmacological interventions for fluid management
 - Complex edema consideration for anasarca, superior vena cava syndrome, vascular anomalies, line occlusion, post-surgical recovery
- 4:15-5:00** LAB + Lecture: Edema Management
- Superficial lymphatic facilitation with edema mobilization techniques; utilizing a clear-flow-clear technique with activation of movement
 - Diaphragm facilitation, lower extremity clearance
 - Pectoralis/diaphragm facilitation for upper extremity clearance
 - Facial region clearance with oral motor interventions
 - Positioning and handling strategies to maximize lymphatic activation, neutral warmth for fluid viscosity reduction
 - Additional treatments for specific edema
 - Kinesiotaping
 - Pressure garments
- 5:00-5:15** Case Analysis
- 5:15-5:30** Goal Writing

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Live Webinar

August 7 and 8, 2026

8:40 am EST • 7:40 am CST • 6:40 am MST • 5:40 am PST (US)

Registration is for both sessions. Log-in instructions and course materials will be emailed/added to your ERI account 5-7 days prior to the first date of the course.



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Live Webinar: Babies’ Bodies and Brains: Multi-System Assessment and Treatment of the Premature/Medically Complex Infant for the Rehabilitation Professional

With Holly Schifsky

☐ August 7 and 8, 2026

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